



WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

MY FOURTEEN MONTHS AT THE FRONT

An American Boy's Baptism of Fire

By WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

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The most graphic account of the great war that has yet been written comes from the pen of a twenty-two-year-old Boston boy, who has just returned from France, where as dragon guardman, dispatch rider and motor-car driver he served fourteen months under the British flag. Out of thirty-one motorcycle dispatch riders he was one of four survivors.

It was soon after this that the Germans got their forces together and made their first attack on our positions outside of Ypres. I was in the town when the first shells landed, and the panic they created was something terrible to witness.

Men, women and children seemed to have but one idea, and that was to get out as quickly as possible. Old women would go staggering along with their belongings tied in each end of a bed sheet and the whole thing slung around their neck. The streets were crowded with them. Men were driving pigs and chickens before them and the women leading and carrying children. The roads were littered with dead and dying, wounded horses screaming their horrible sound and kicking. The din was terrible. Shells would burst in the roads choked with people, but the momentary gap would immediately fill and the panic stricken people would sweep over their own dead.

At the time I could not see to realize what was happening. I felt numb all over, but with an awful terror gripping me, and I longed to turn and fly.



While Shells Continued Screaming Over Us, They Were Bursting in the Town.

I remember seeing my officer coming, so I got out and started the engine. There were two horses standing just behind the car, and as the officer went to step in a piece of shell cut one of these horses in two.

As soon as we were clear of the town we were all right, for, while the shells continued screaming over us, they were still bursting in the town.

This was the beginning of the first battle of Ypres, in which the little Seventh division did the seemingly impossible. Day and night the Germans poured shells into us, and still we held on. Then their artillery fire would slacken, and they would hurl their superior numbers against our "contemptible little army" in a vain endeavor to crush us by sheer weight, as it were.

The enemy seemed to rise out of the ground and sweep toward us like a great tidal wave, but our machine guns poured steel into them at the rate of 600 shots per minute, and they'd go down like grass before the scythe. If they did reach our lines at all they never went back to tell about it.

It is my honest opinion that a man in action goes temporarily insane, for were it not so how could any man continue to work a gun that was sending hundreds of his fellow creatures into a heap of groaning, squirming death? That is exactly what was happening. The Germans were climbing over heaps of their own dead only to meet the same fate themselves. The deeds of valor which have escaped notice around the Ypres salient would fill at least one large book.

With the end of the first battle of Ypres our division retired to a village called St. Jean Capelle. While the Belgian civilians had been so nice to us on the way down from Ostend I am sorry to say that we found them exactly the opposite here. We had not been in the town three hours before we had three Belgian peasants arrested and convicted of espionage.

There was a windmill on a hill just back of the village, and some one noticed that as soon as we entered the village this windmill started to go, although there wasn't a breath of air

stirring. Investigation showed that two Belgians were signaling to the Germans in this way.

The other case was even worse. One of our police stopped an old Belgian with a bag under his arm and asked him what was in it. He replied that it contained nothing but a few vegetables. Something aroused our chap's suspicion, and on examination he found that it contained two pigeons with messages giving our exact strength attached to them. These men were taken to the rear and shot. Things like this make it very unpleasant for all concerned.

It was about this time that a new driver was found for the general's car, so that left me without any definite work to do. At that time, too, we had the first armored cars in action on our part of the line. They were beautiful machines, sixty horsepower, mounted with machine guns or three pounders. While I was waiting to find out what was to become of me I made one trip in the armored car—that is to say, I went into action with it once. Of course the gun was worked by expert gunners and I was simply acting as a spare driver in case anything serious happened. The body of the car was covered with bullet proof steel, and it was bullet proof too.

We didn't get up as far as some of the cars had been, but we got quite far enough to suit me. What with the racket our gun was making and the noise of the bullets bouncing off our armor plate, it was no place for a nervous man. The hard part for me was the inactivity, simply sitting there and waiting in case I should be wanted.

We didn't stay there so very long, and I was not sorry for it, either. That was my only trip in an armored car, and I'm not particular about having any more, thank you.

I was advised that the only way I could escape being sent back to England was to be transferred to the army service corps. This corps, the royal engineers and the royal army medical corps, are the three largest corps in the British army. When you join the A. S. C. you are never sure just what you will be let in for, because as a rule an A. S. C. man is eligible for general enlistment, and that means that he may be used for any branch of the service when he is needed.

My luck had held good so far, and I decided that I might as well push it a little bit more, and so I got transferred. I found that I was to be attached to the staff of the Fifth army corps, but as that corps was not yet in the country I was used for anything that turned up.

It became known that I could ride a motorcycle, and so I was temporarily attached as a spare rider to motor machine gun section No. 3. These machines are simply motorcycles with a side car attached, but instead of a nice cushioned seat on the side car there is a little bucket seat for a gunner and a machine gun. The gunner and rider are entirely in the open, as it would be impossible for so small a machine to carry any protection. I went out on several practice runs, and one night about 11 o'clock we were called to take four of the guns up to the trenches in a hurry.

I thought I had had some thrilling rides in my time, but I never imagined anything to equal that one. We carried no lights and had to fly through the inky blackness, guessing at the road. Several times we got stuck and my mate and I dragged the machine out of the ditch and flew on again.

Eventually we reached the place on the Menin road known as "hell fire corner," and I think the name must have been given it from its condition that night. As the star shells went up the whole place would be almost as light as day. The Germans were shelling the road and the air was filled with all kinds of missiles.

That road was literally a death trap, and how so many came out without being touched is one of the mysteries that never can be explained. We could hear two of the guns which had got there before us in action further up the road. We continued to feel our way along until we came to where our officer was

waiting for us. He showed us our position and went back to look for the machine that had not yet arrived.

Our position was in a ditch just by a place where the road had been cut by an old support trench. We eased the machine into the ditch and got her firmly fixed. Our officer came dashing back and told us to cover the road where it led out from the German trenches. Then it was simply a case of wait until they started to advance from that quarter.

We sat there for two hours before we saw any signs of activity, but when it did come it came with a rush. Hundreds of Germans seemed to rise from nowhere, and that road was literally rammed with them.

Dick, the gunner, opened at the first sign, and the machine guns from our trenches were pouring it into them too. They went down in hundreds, and, while our fire checked them some-



As Soon as We Entered the Village This Windmill Started to Go.

what, they still came on. It was certainly a despairing feeling to be streaming bullets into the Germans and see them still advance. After several minutes of this the whistles blew for "cease fire" and our infantry jumped the parapet and went after them with the bayonet. They broke the attack right there, and, more than that, they took two lines of German trenches.

A few days after this an incident occurred that, to my way of thinking, was one of the most wonderful things that ever happened. Volunteer dispatch riders for "dangerous work" were called for. About eighteen of our chaps offered themselves, and of course all were accepted. A dispatch was to be carried about two miles along the road which follows the bank of the Yser canal. This road was constantly being swept by German machine gun and rifle fire. The dispatch was to be handed to a French commander who was waiting for it.

The first man was given a copy of the dispatch, and he started out with it. This road ran right under the nose of the Germans and was in full view of their trenches all the way. It was so swept by machine gun and rifle fire that it seemed as if no one could possibly live through a hundred yards of it.

The first man started and was soon out of sight. They waited in vain for a certain length of time for a signal that he had arrived, and then called No. 2. No. 2 started out, but we saw him go down before he had gone a hundred yards.

Then No. 3 started. It was pitiful to watch those poor chaps. When a man knew it was his turn next I could see the poor fellow nervously working on his machine. He'd prime the engine, then he'd open and close the throttle quickly several times—anything, in fact, to keep himself busy. When his number would be called he'd hesitate a second and perhaps flood the carburetor, then he'd take his dispatch and suddenly dash out.

Six of these fellows went down in less than half an hour. No. 7 was a young fellow whose name I don't know. I wish I did, for he was certainly the nerviest man I ever saw.

"No. 7" was hardly out of the officer's mouth before he had his dispatch and was on his way. About five minutes later the signal came that the dispatch had been delivered.

My officer told me afterward that the French general to whom he had handed the dispatch had taken the medaille militaire off his own breast and pinned it on that of this young dispatch rider. He was also later awarded the Victoria cross and given a commission. It is things like this that make one proud to belong to such an army.

CHAPTER III.

Christmas in the Trenches.

SOON after this I received orders to proceed by automobile to Aire and wait for instructions. Aire was at that time the headquarters of the Indian contingent, and I was anxious to see the Indians in action. After two days' waiting there I got orders to go to Boescheppe and report myself for

duty to Lieutenant McNulty. Boescheppe was not far away, so I started at once and arrived before dark. I found Lieutenant McNulty without any trouble, and he told me to report to him again the next morning, as he would not want me that day.

I found a cafe where there was room for me, and I made myself comfortable. The place was full of Indian troops, and I was very much interested in them, as they were the first I had seen in France.

That night I went around the village to see all there was to be seen, and unintentionally I stayed out after 8 o'clock. I was making my way back to my billet along the middle of the road. It was as dark as pitch, and I couldn't see a yard in front of me. Suddenly I bumped into something, and quicker than a flash two hands closed around my throat. My mouth just naturally opened wide, and I yelled "Friend!" the loudest I ever yelled in my life.

Then a light shone in my face, and I saw it was a great big Sikh on sentry go. As soon as he saw my uniform it was all right, but I was shivering for half an hour, and I vowed I'd never go prowling around at night again as long as I remained within the Indian lines.

The Indians are the most religious people I ever saw. They seem to live only for their religion, and all their ac-



The Gurkhas Pray to Their Koorkree, Most Murderous Looking Knife.

tions are governed by it. Their belief in warfare is to ask no quarter and to give none. They will fight until the last gasp.

The Gurkhas pray to their koorkree, the most murderous looking knife I ever saw. They never draw that knife unless they spill blood, and if you want to see one of the weapons you must let them cut your finger before you may look at it. These Gurkhas are supposed to be the best fighters of any of the Indian troops, and in recognition of this fact their pay is just 1 half-penny a day less than that of the white soldier.

The Sikh places caste above everything. He will not drink from anything that has been used by a white man, for if he did he would lose caste. If he happens to be eating and a white man's shadow falls across the Sikh's food he will starve rather than touch it again.

The Indians got along very well with

the French people, and some of them could even talk a little broken French. The suffering among the Indians during the first winter was terrible, but they bore it all fairly cheerfully and did their duty well. They are not trench fighters, though, and cannot play the waiting game. They want to get out at the enemy, and the officers have their work cut out to keep them in the trenches for very long.

The Germans certainly did not like the Indians a little bit. The Indians' belief regarding no quarter is not especially nice to think about, and their natural instincts are hard to control. They have a weakness for cutting off ears and heads and keeping other little souvenirs. The Germans know this, and naturally it puts the fear of death into them.

I spent Christmas day of 1914 in the trenches just south of Ypres. Christmas eve was a beautiful night, and the Germans who held the trenches opposite left us very much alone the entire evening. We didn't bother them either.

There was a beautiful moon, and with everything so quiet and peaceful it was hard to realize that there was a war on. During the evening the Germans started singing, and I heard some of the most beautiful music I ever listened to in my life. The song might start just opposite us, and it would be taken up all along the line, and soon it would seem as if all the Germans in Belgium were singing. When they had finished we would applaud with all our might, and then we would give them a song in return.

A regiment in the trenches started "My Old Kentucky Home." The men were getting well along with it when some one in the German trenches joined the singing in just as good English as any of us could speak. It was beautiful, but it made me awfully homesick. After they had finished the same German voice sang "Dancing Around," and, believe me, that fellow could sing ragtime. He was applauded uproariously, and then we sang some more popular songs for them, and so it went until the wee small hours of the morning.

During the night a couple of our chaps crawled up almost to the German parapet, and with them they took a phonograph and a record. They wound up the machine, put on the record and attached a piece of string to the starting lever. Then they crawled back, unwinding the string as they came. The next morning they pulled the string, and it started the machine playing the song which was so popular in England at that time, "When We Wind Up the Watch on the Rhine." You can bet that that phonograph was filled full of lead in short order.

During the few weeks directly after Christmas I was in the trenches just south of Ypres most of the time. When on duty in the daytime it was not so bad, but the nights were awful. The Germans had the advantage over us in that their trenches were on higher ground, and they drained all the water down into our own. We had only buckets to bail with, and it was very slow work, as well as dangerous. Then, too, the cold weather increased our troubles.

I notice in my diary, which I kept from time to time, that I entered an incident which shows our state. I will quote you just what I wrote:

DR. F. R. BOWERSOX

PHYSICIAN & SURGEON

PHONE NOS.

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HOUSE - 1502

L. C. PRICE, M. D.

Office corner Echols and Jackson Sts. at Mrs. Boche's

Phone 4302

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